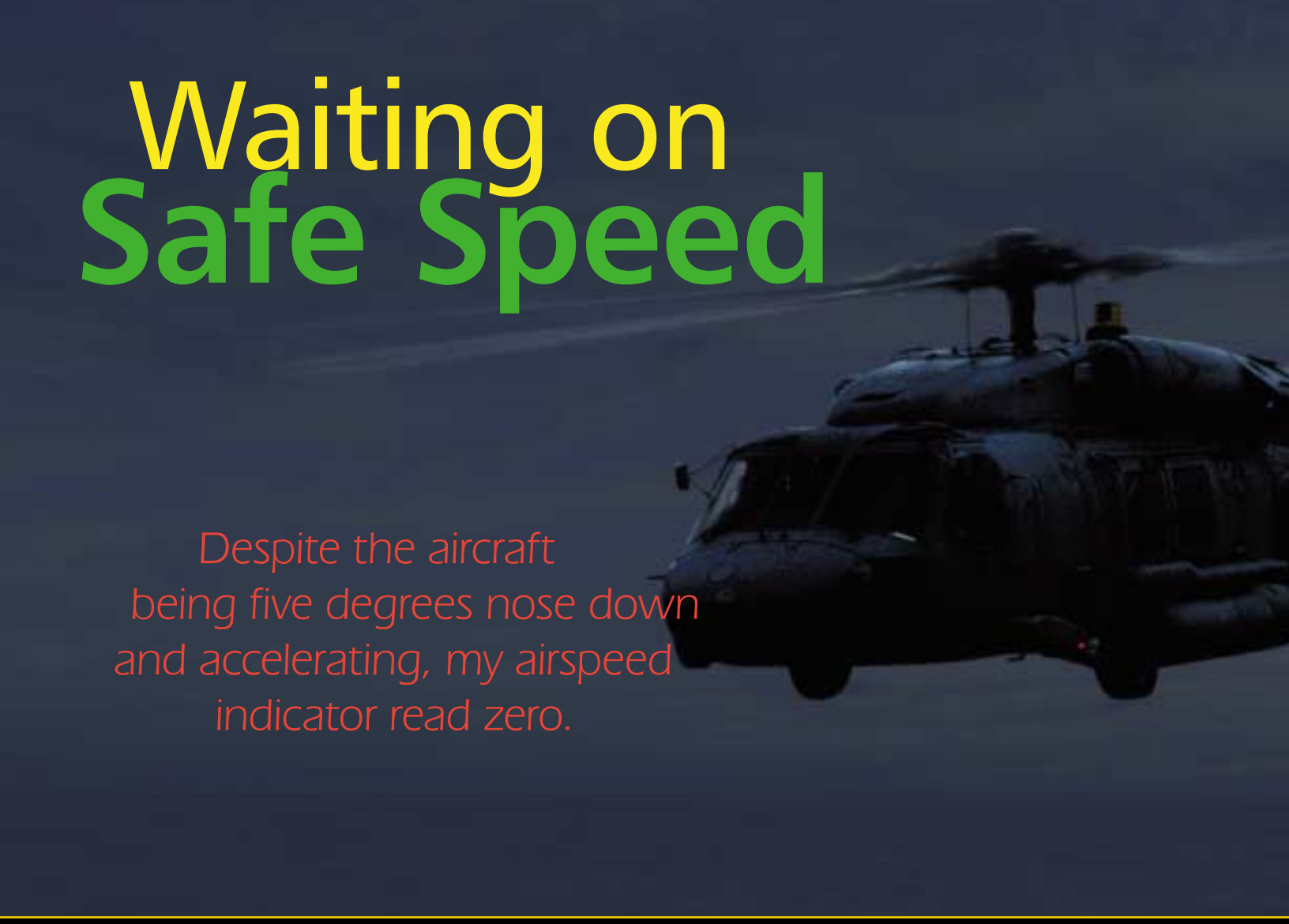
Waiting on Safe Speed



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By Lt. Jon Clemens

Our WestPac deployment, in support of the JCS Battle Group, had begun four months earlier and had been grueling. The dynamics of Arabian Sea operations, schedule changes, and the increased number of flight hours kept everyone on their toes. Our crew just had received waivers for flying over 100 hours in January, with no end in sight. Operation Enduring Freedom pushed us to the max.

Most of our missions took place between midnight and 6 a.m., and this flight was no exception. With the brief and preflight completed, the ship called away flight quarters. I strapped in while the helicopter aircraft commander (HAC) took a final walk-around. Because nothing noteworthy occurred during preflight, I assumed the aircraft was ready for flight. We progressed through the checklists, engaged the rotors, and were set for launch. Our aircrewman made one last walk-around to arm the chaff and flare dispensers and the Hellfire missiles. We were ready for a green deck.

"Beams open, green deck, lift," came over land-launch from the LSO. We pulled into a hover, checked the gauges, and slid to the aft edge of the flight deck. We checked the gauges again, pedal turned, and, with one more check of the gauges, the HAC raised the collective to depart. I backed him up as he pulled in power.

"One, two, three positive rates of climb, waiting on safe single-engine airspeed and the stabilator to program," I said.

The HAC pushed the nose over to accel-

erate. I kept my eyes on the gauges to call flight parameters. Despite the aircraft being five degrees nose down and accelerating, my airspeed indicator read zero. I cross-checked the HAC's airspeed indicator with mine and noticed his airspeed fluctuated between 30 and 50 knots. "Still waiting on safe speed," I added.

Passing through 150 feet, I didn't have any airspeed indication, and the HAC's indicator still was fluctuating. The HAC and I couldn't figure it out. The HAC selected doppler to read groundspeed, and he continued the climb-out to 1,000 feet. The stabilator received mixed inputs from the pitot tubes, so it remained programmed 20 to 25 degrees down, causing an excessive nose-down attitude.

I suggested we turn on the pitot heat. The HAC agreed, thinking salt ingestion might be the problem, and the heat would clear the tubes. I turned on the pitot heat just as the HAC decided to return to the ship and troubleshoot. The HAC also wanted to brief the LSO on our problem. Just after we started to return, the airspeed indicators began to work.

We couldn't figure it out, but, since our problems seemed to be over, we discussed whether to continue the mission. We had our airspeed back, the stabilator was functioning normally, and the aircraft was flying fine. We were back to normal.

Suddenly, I smelled something like fried noodles. Thinking the AW had cracked open his dinner, I asked him what he was eating.

"I'm not eating anything," he replied.

The HAC and I wondered what was up. As we continued to fly, the smell became more pungent, like an electrical fire. We searched the cabin, but couldn't locate the source of the odor.

As the HAC slowed the aircraft to eliminate the fumes, we realized the smell had begun after I turned on the pitot heat. I trained the forward-looking-infrared radar (FLIR) onto the pitot tubes, and, to our surprise, the covers still were on the tubes. The heat had melted through the covers and caused the overpowering fumes to fill the cockpit. In haste, we had missed a small, yet crucial preflight item. The HAC terminated the hop, and we called the ship to set up for recovery.

While the HAC is responsible for the safe and orderly conduct of flight, all crew members are responsible for safety and using ORM. "I'm just a 2P" is not a valid exception to the rule. We failed to pay attention to detail on our preflight and missed the pitot-tube covers. ORM university states, "change is the mother of all risk."

Given our op tempo and the repetitive nature of our flights, we unknowingly had allowed ourselves to fall victim to the second mother of all risk: complacency. We fell victim to "looking but not seeing."

Lt. Clemens flies with HSL-47.